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Zeile et al.

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(54) **ROAMING TRANSPORT DISTRIBUTION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
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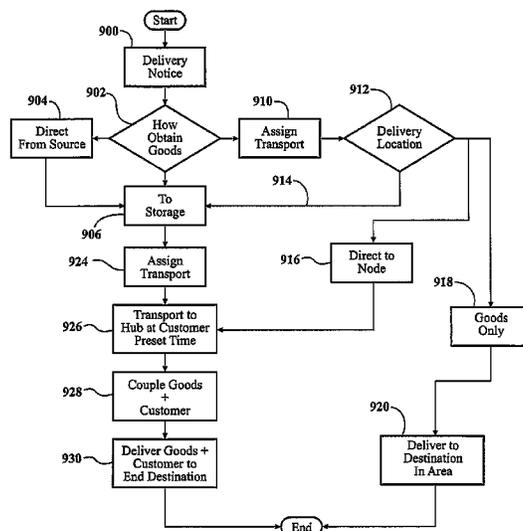
(51) **Int. Cl.**
G06Q 10/06 (2012.01)
G06Q 10/08 (2012.01)
(Continued)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC **G06Q 10/06311** (2013.01); **G06Q 10/047** (2013.01); **G06Q 10/063116** (2013.01); **G06Q 10/083** (2013.01); **G06Q 50/30** (2013.01)

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A roaming transport distribution management apparatus and method are provided. A controller selects transports within a defined service zone in response to customer transit requests from customer locations for customer pick-up and delivery inbound or outbound directions from the hub. A hub manager varies the position and/or the size of an exclusive coverage area of each transport within the overall service zone to insure a dense accumulation of transports over the entire service zone and alters the position of other transports in response to the movement of a transport inbound or outbound from the hub with a passenger. The hub manager can vary the size of the exclusive coverage area of each transport to account for population and request call densities and the number of available transports. In addition, the transport system may be used to transport goods from a delivery source to a customer designated location within the service zone as well as coupling the goods with the customer at a central hub when the customer arrives at the central hub.

18 Claims, 15 Drawing Sheets



Related U.S. Application Data

- a continuation-in-part of application No. 13/563,618, filed on Jul. 31, 2012, now abandoned.
- (60) Provisional application No. 61/937,880, filed on Feb. 10, 2014, provisional application No. 61/879,737, filed on Sep. 19, 2013, provisional application No. 61/626,123, filed on Sep. 20, 2011.
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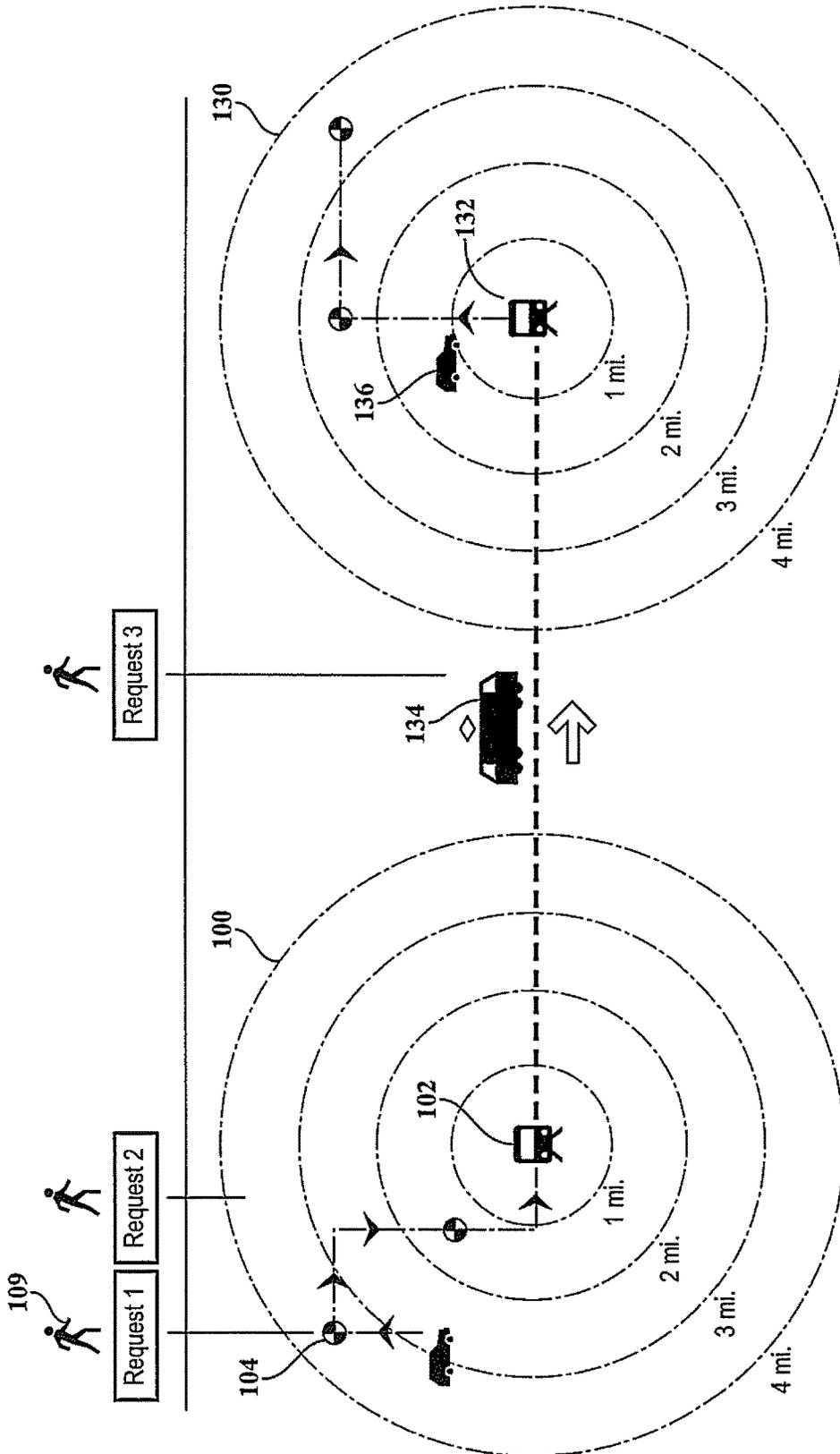


FIG. 2

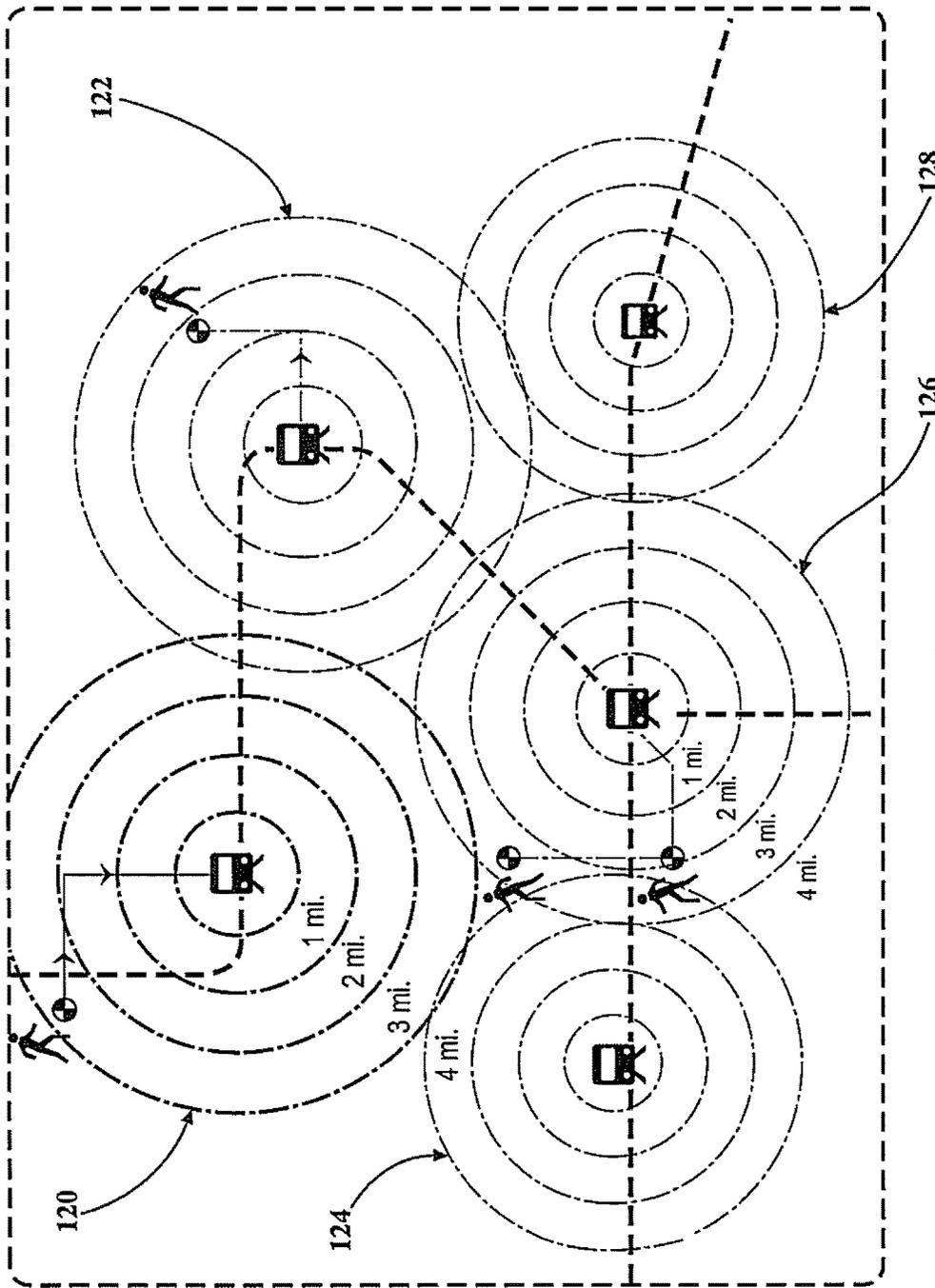


FIG. 3

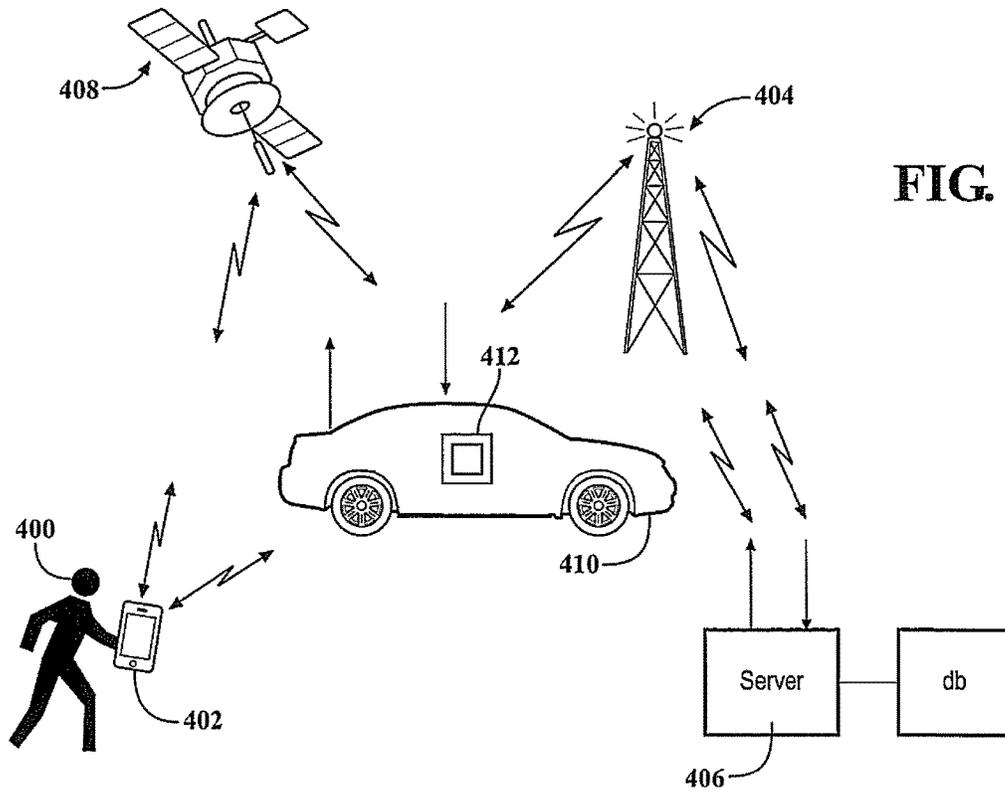


FIG. 4

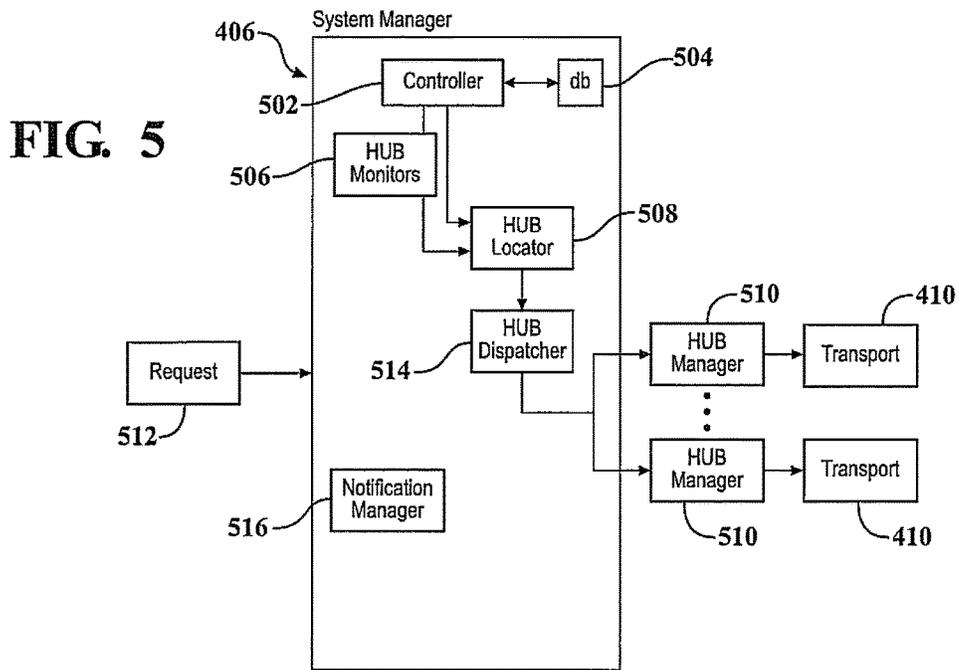


FIG. 5

FIG. 6

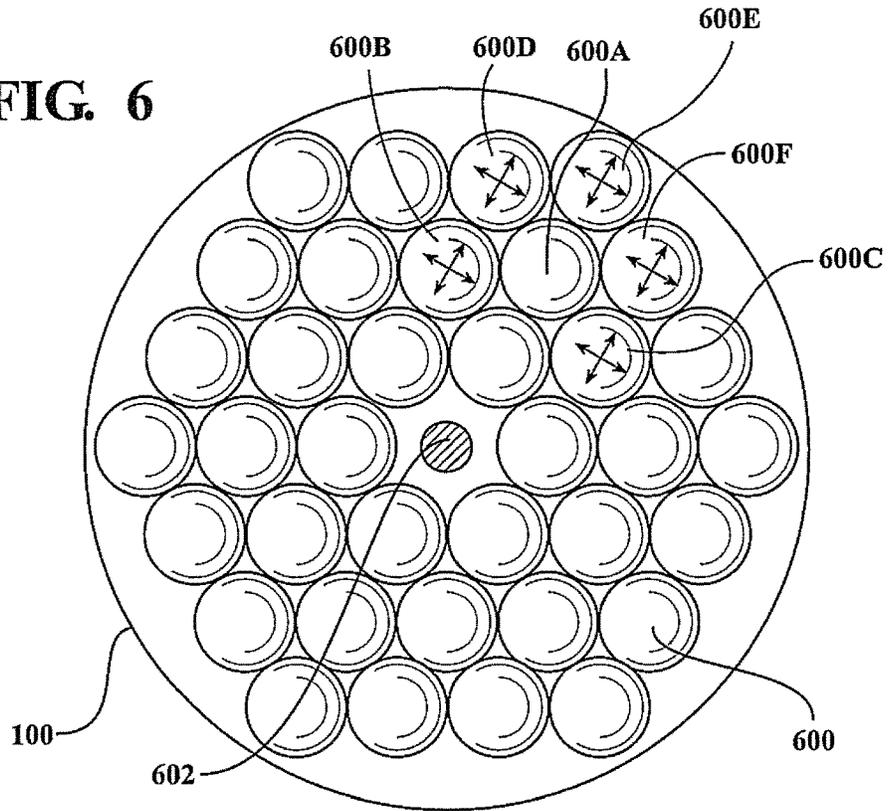


FIG. 7

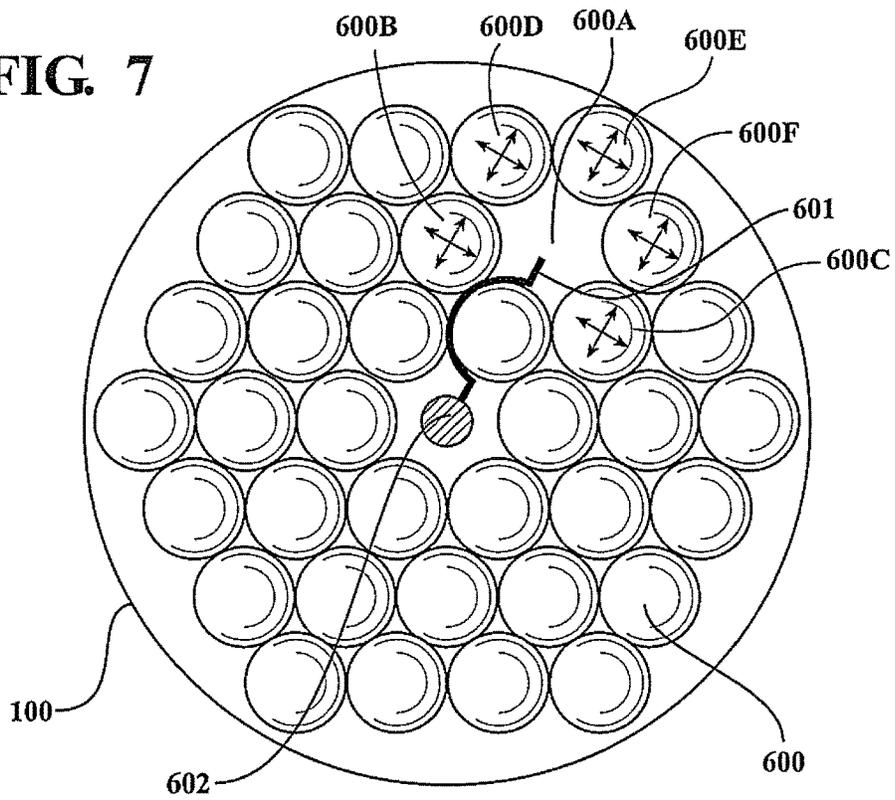


FIG. 8

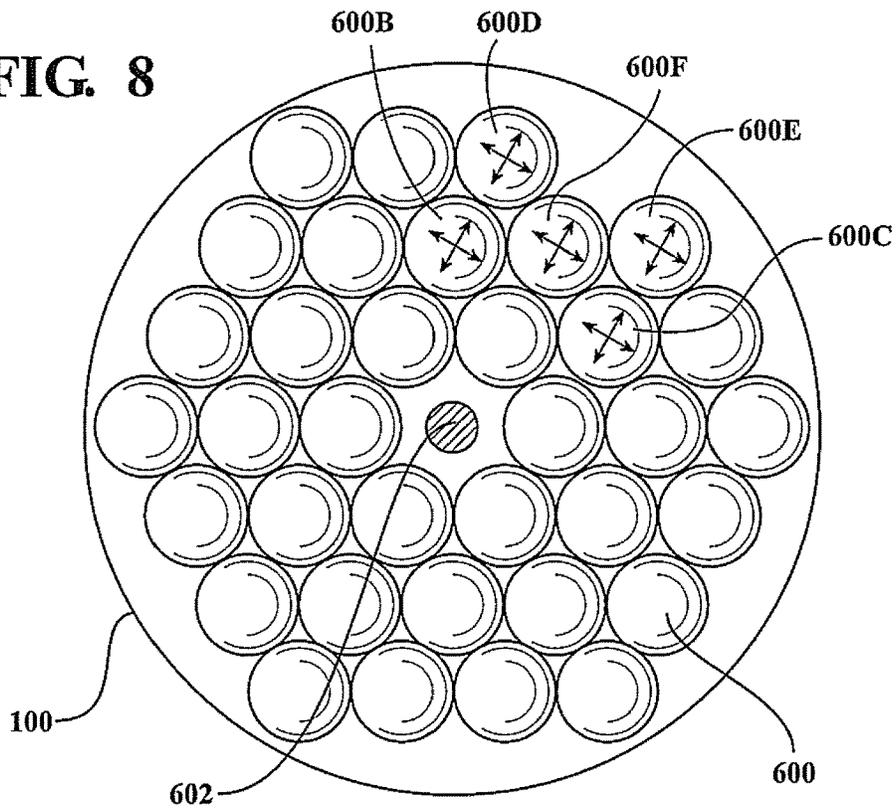


FIG. 9A

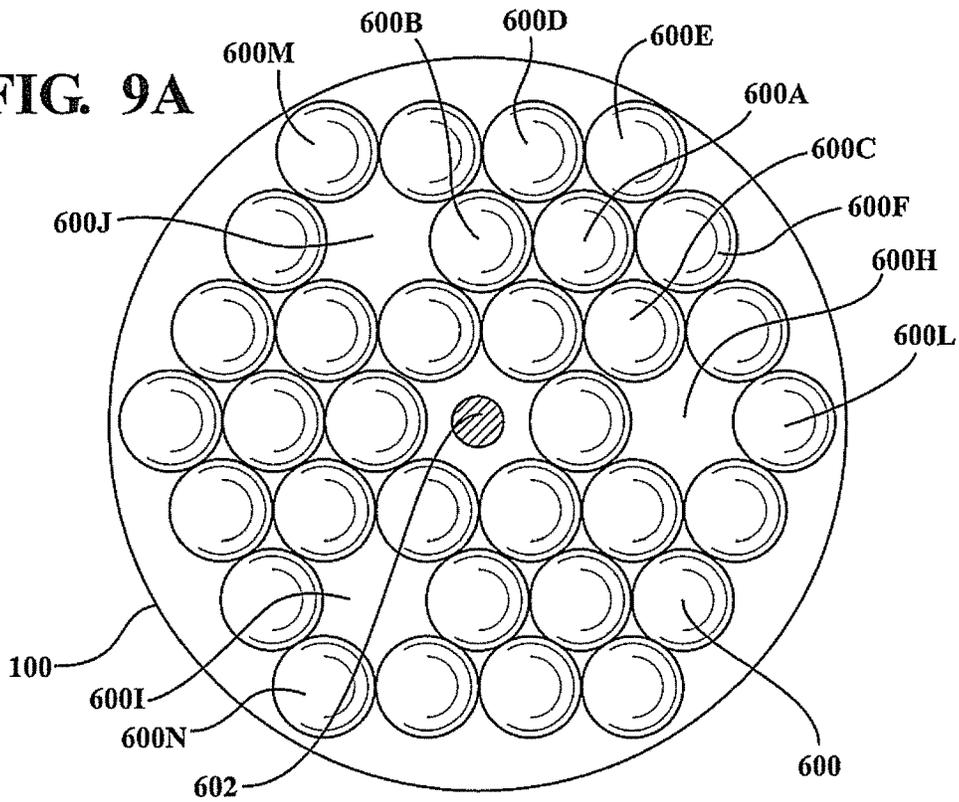


FIG. 9B

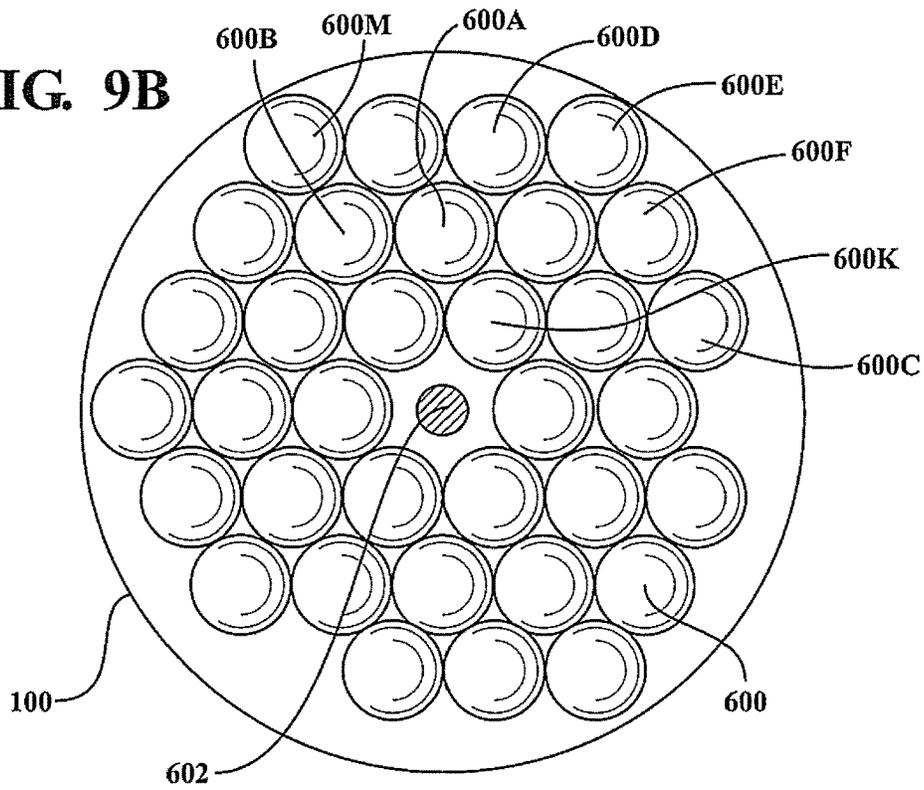


FIG. 9C

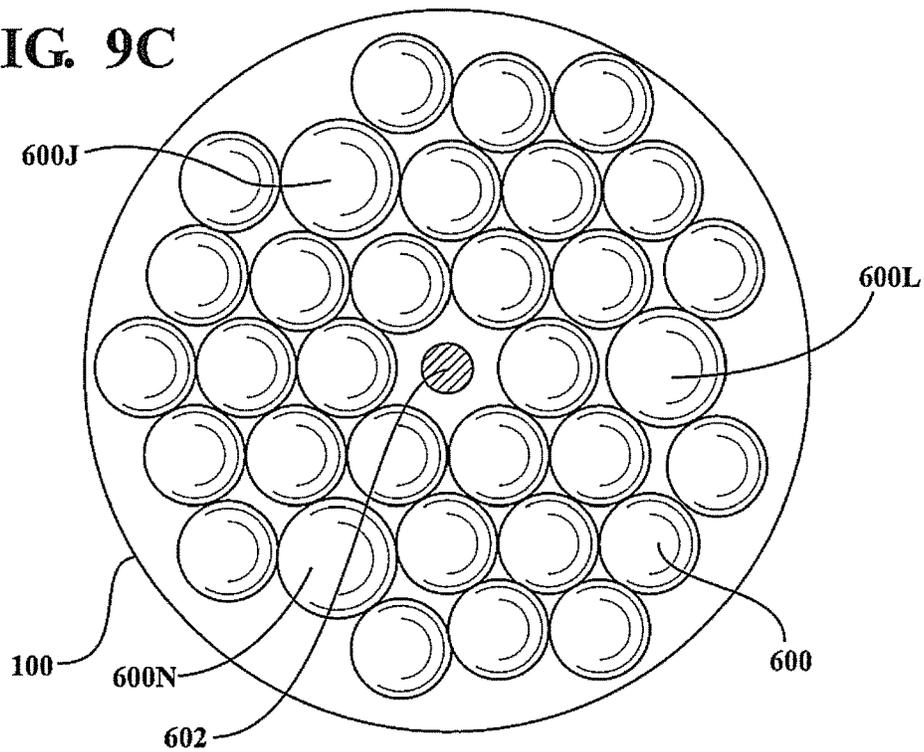


FIG. 9D

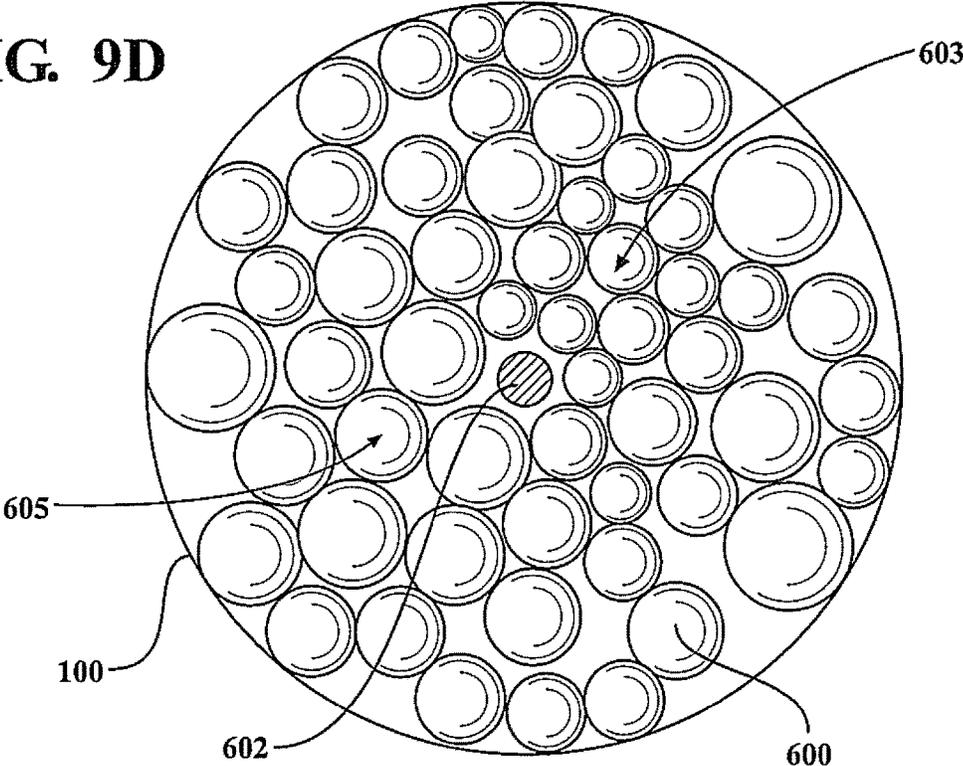
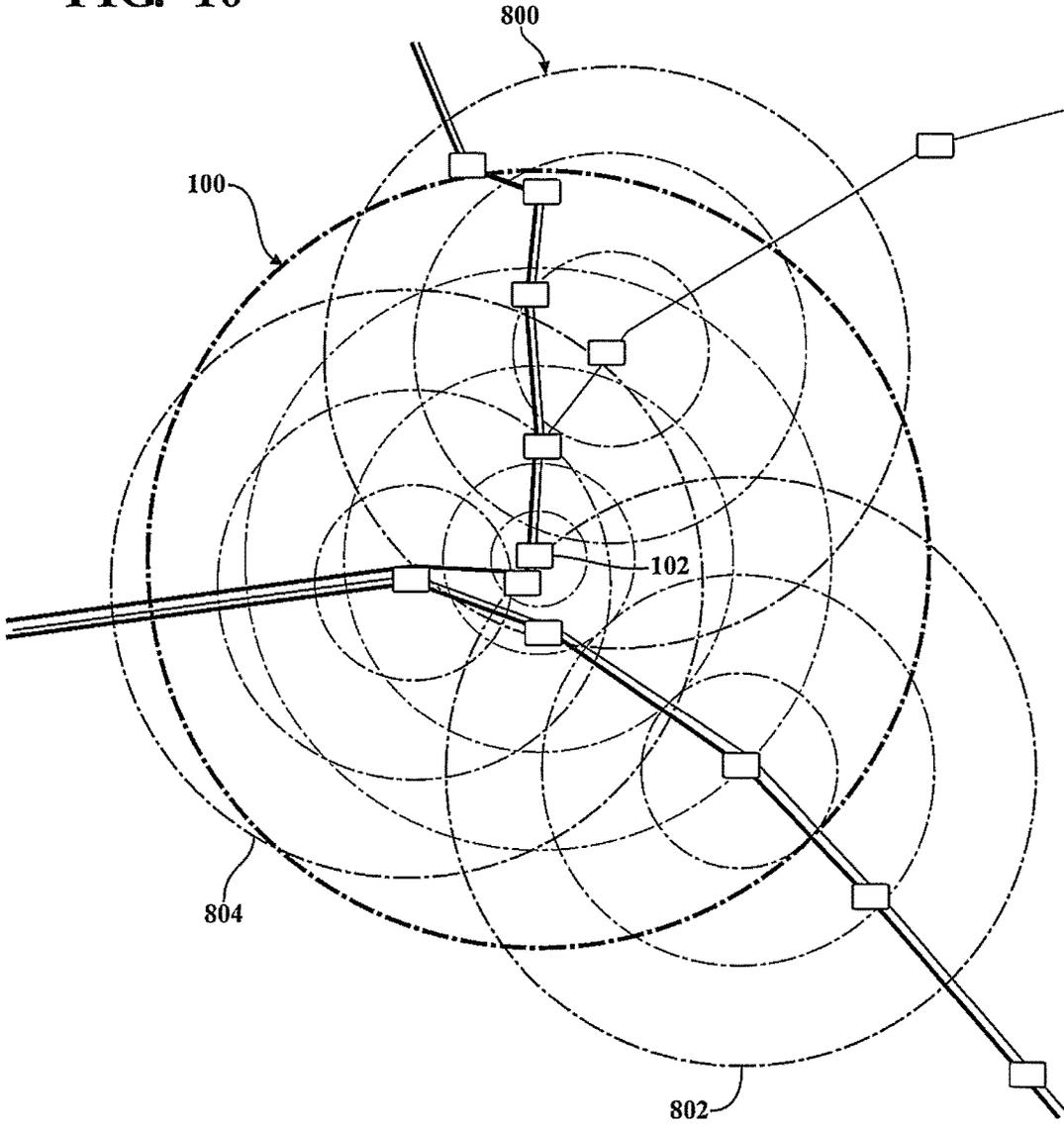
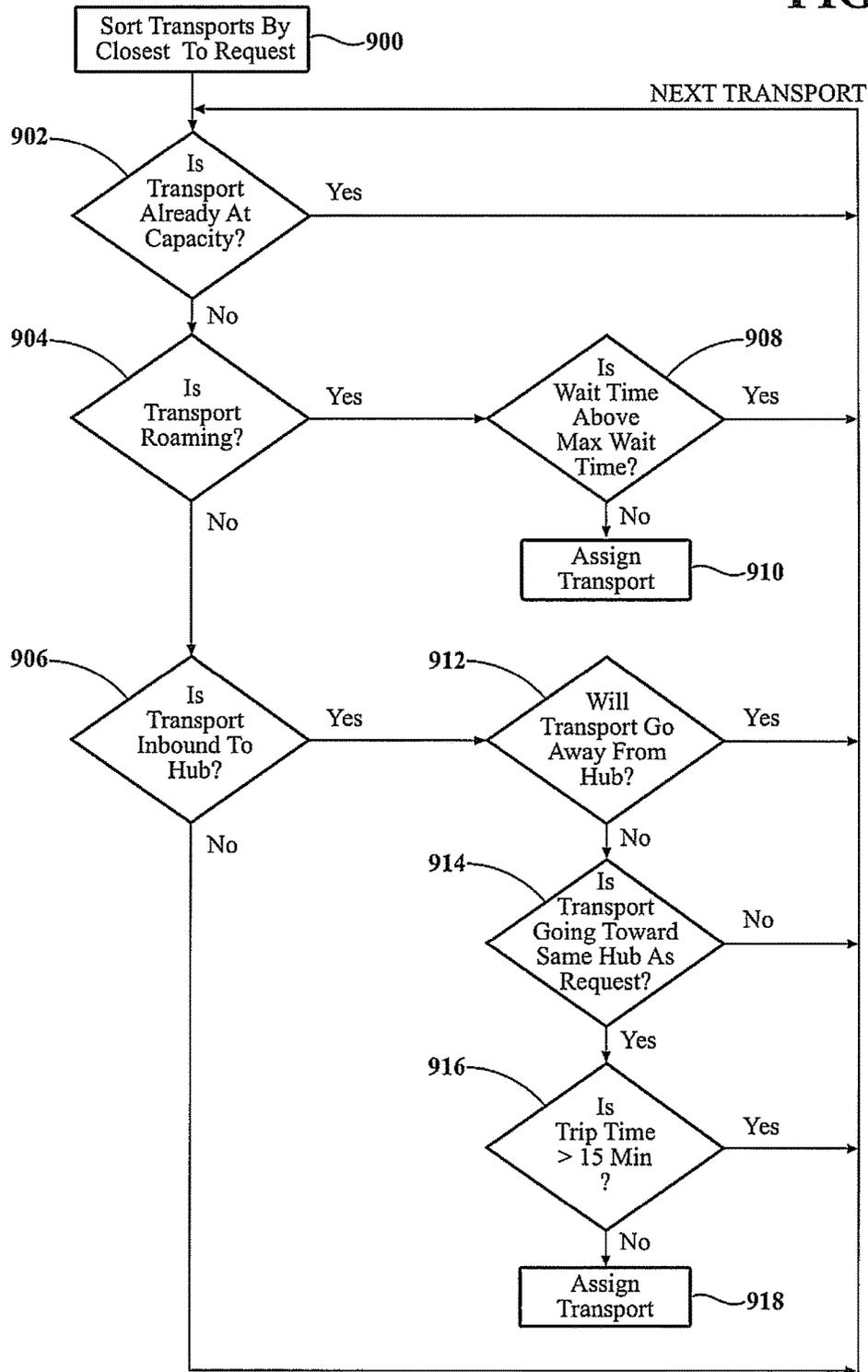


FIG. 10



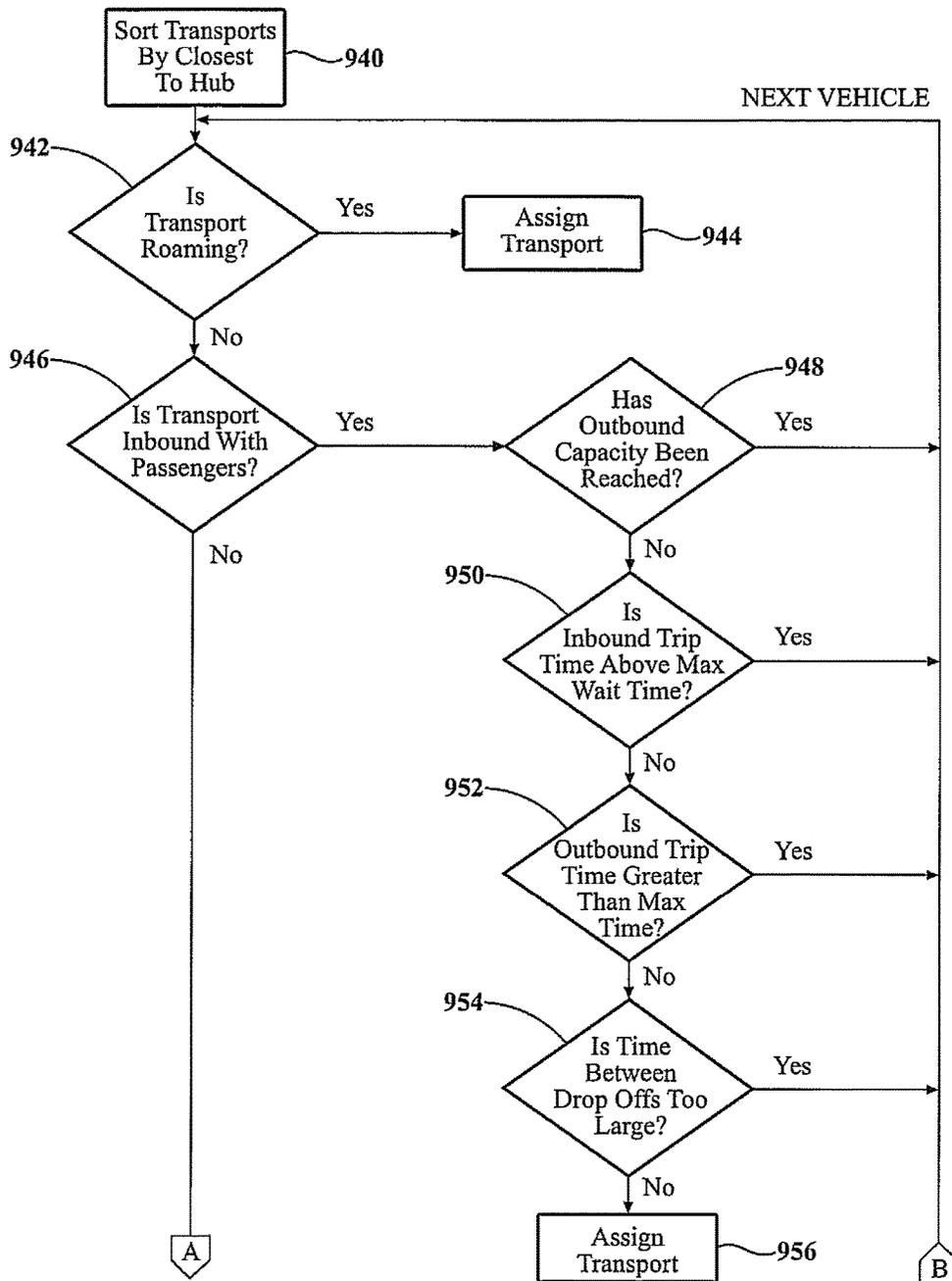
INBOUND REQUEST

FIG. 11



OUTBOUND REQUEST

FIG. 12A



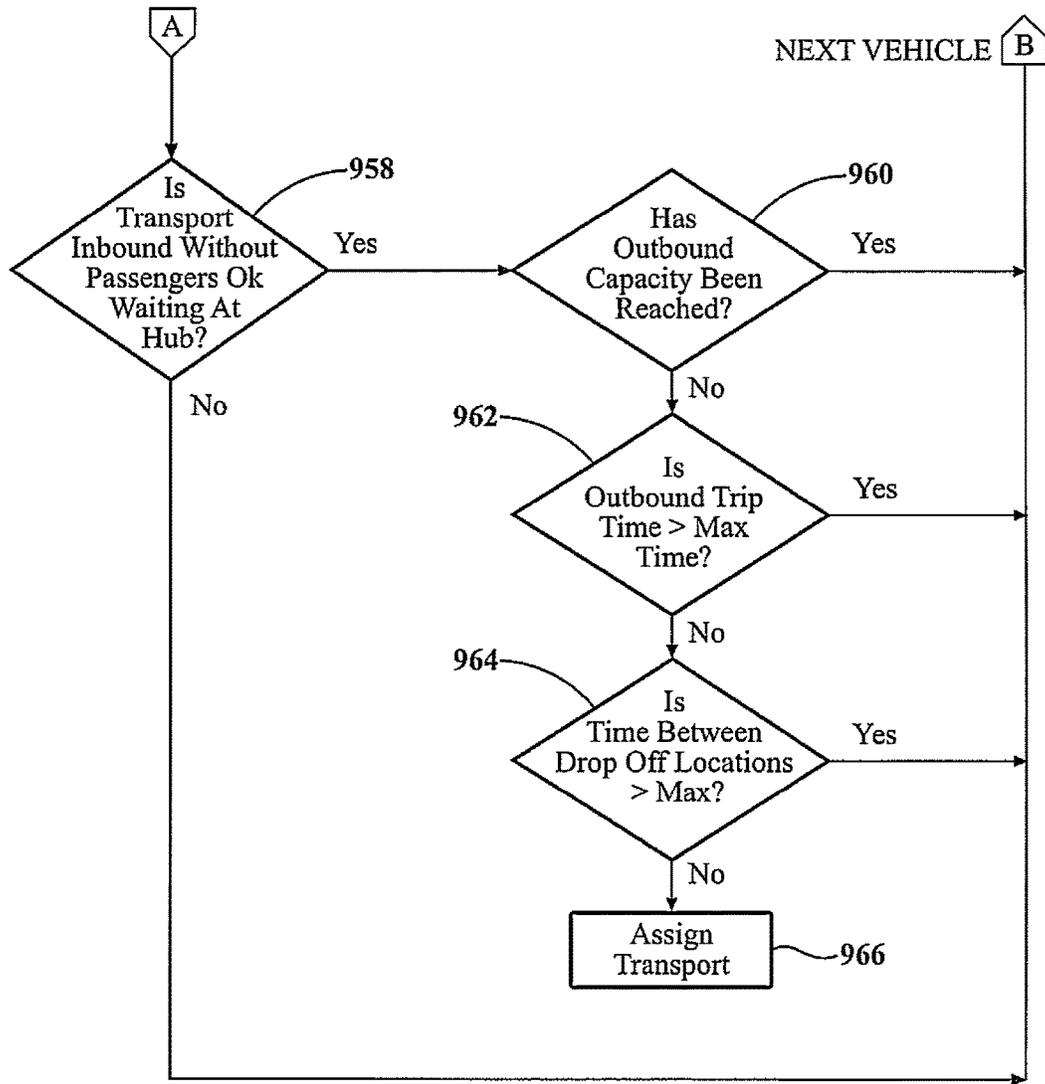


FIG. 12B

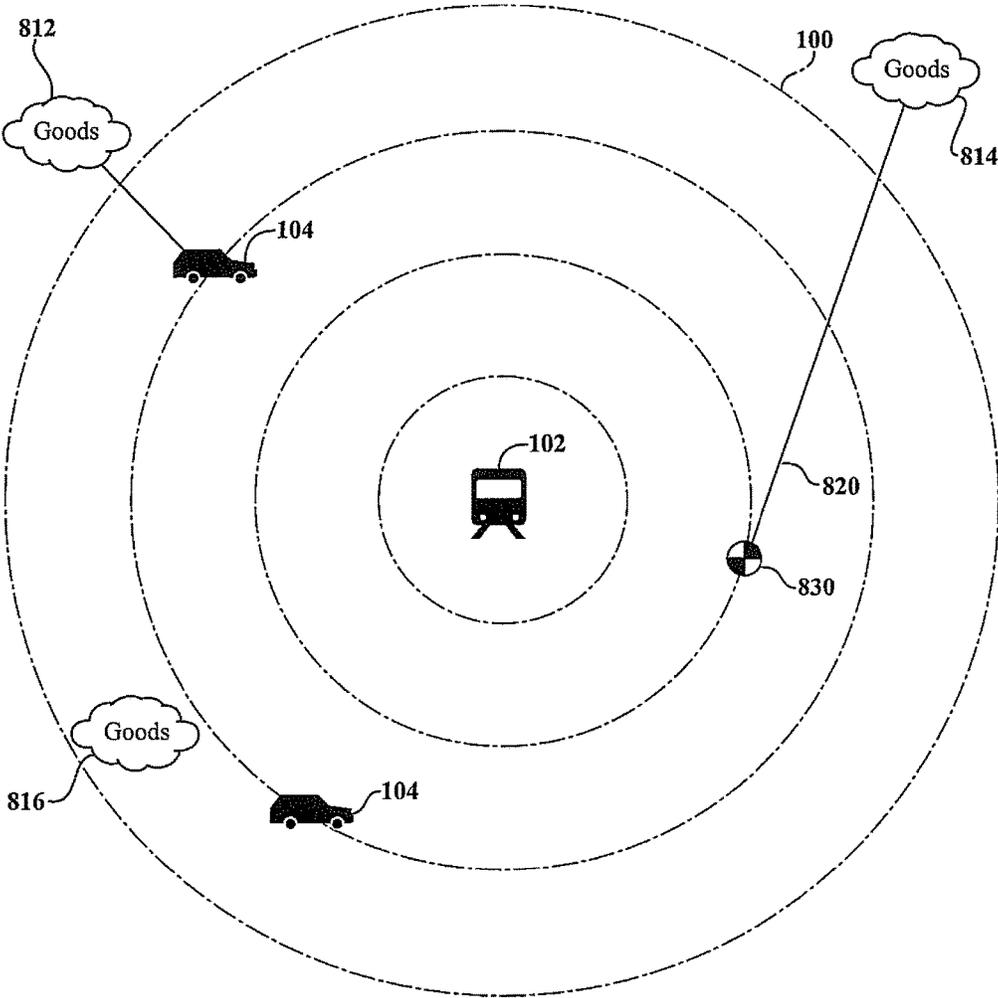


FIG. 13

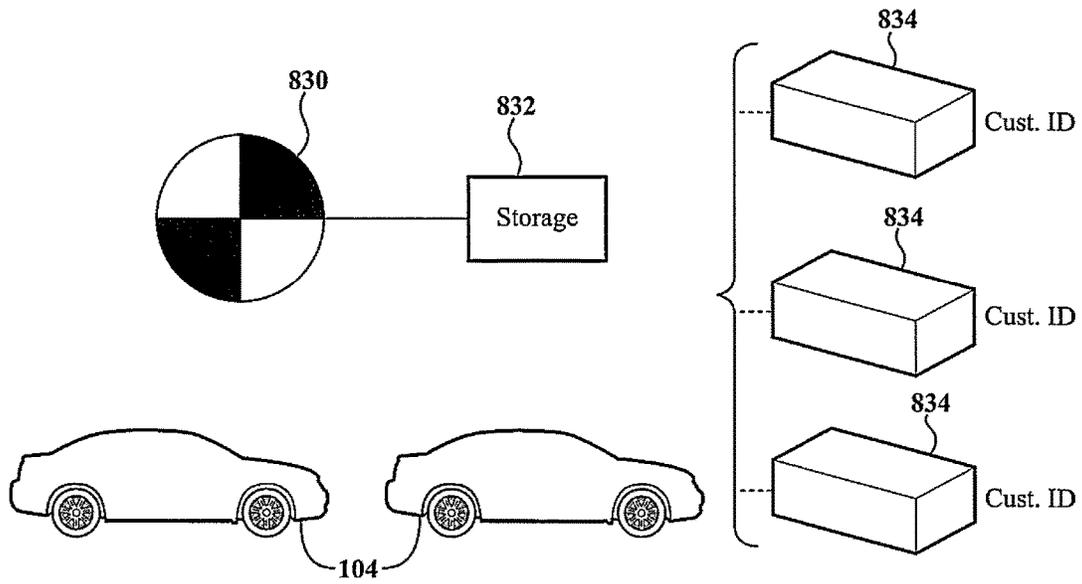


FIG. 14

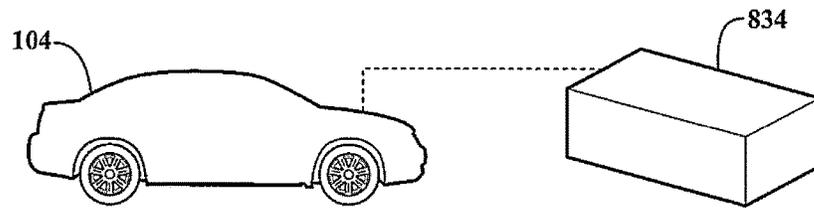


FIG. 15

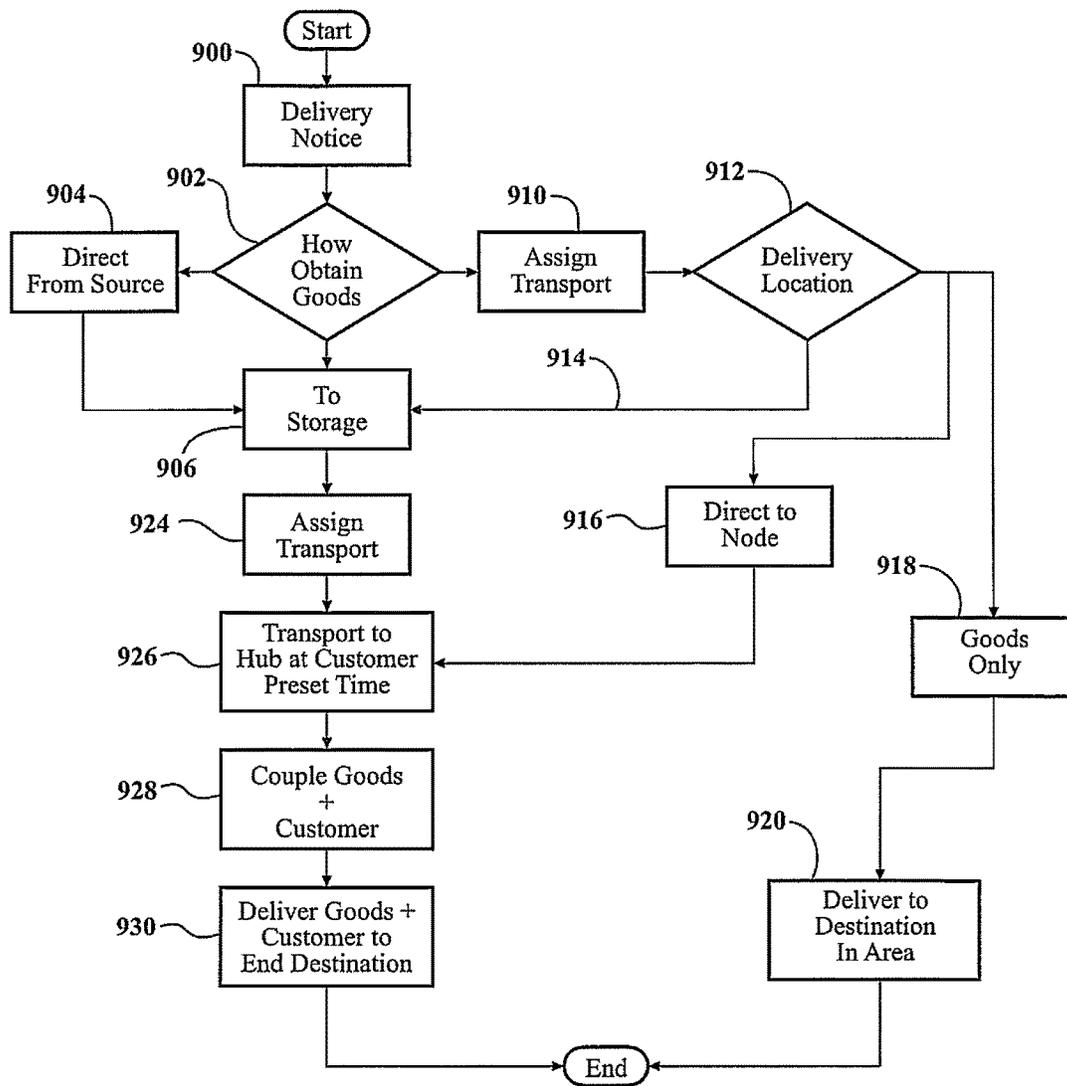


FIG. 16

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ROAMING TRANSPORT DISTRIBUTION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

CROSS REFERENCE TO CO-PENDING APPLICATION

This application claims priority benefit to the Feb. 10, 2014 filing date of provisional patent application Ser. No. 61/937,880 for ROAMING TRANSPORT DISTRIBUTION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM, and is a continuation-in-part of co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 14/491,565, filed Sep. 19, 2014 for ROAMING TRANSPORT DISTRIBUTION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM, which claims priority benefit to the Sep. 19, 2013 filing date of provisional patent application Ser. No. 61/879,737 for ROAMING TRANSPORT DISTRIBUTION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM, and which is a continuation-in-part of co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/563,618, filed on Jul. 31, 2012 for URBAN TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM AND METHOD, assigned to the assignee of the present application, which claims priority to U.S. provisional patent application Ser. No. 61/626,123 filed on Sep. 20, 2011, the contents of all which are incorporated herein in their entirety.

BACKGROUND

The present apparatus and method relate to urban transportation systems.

U.S. Patent Publication 2013/0073327 discloses an urban transportation system and method, which provides flexible, door-to-door transportation service between customers within a service area surrounding a node of a station of an urban transportation system, such as a train station, subway station, etc.

In response to a customer request, a transport within a defined service area travels to the location of the customer and then transports the customer between the pick-up location and the node in the transportation system which is the central hub in the service zone. The transport service request instructions are dynamically determined in real time with respect to the customer pick-up location, the current location of the transport, and a predetermined maximum allowable travel time between the customer pick-up and drop-off at the node.

The predetermined travel time may be calculated for a transport using the time that the customer reaches the transit node starting with the time of the pick-up request from the customer until the time the customer reaches the transit node or from the time the customer is picked up and dropped off at the node. Either time periods define the predetermined time period essential to efficient operation of the transit model. For example, if a 15 minute predetermined time period is selected for operation of the transit system, and the first time period calculation described above is utilized then the transit system must respond to a pick-up request from a customer by directing a transport at a second location within the service area surrounding node to the location of the customer, pick-up the customer and then travel by a flexible, real time determined route to the node so that the customer reaches the node within 15 minutes of initiating a pick-up request.

SUMMARY

A roaming transport distribution apparatus and method for servicing service requests for transportation of at least one of customers and goods within a service zone.

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The method includes operating a plurality of transports in a first service zone for transporting at least one of customers and goods within the first service zone to and from a first hub.

5 The method locates one transport of the plurality of transports in the first service zone to answer the service request based on one or more of the location of the first customer and the location of the goods, the location of the transport, the distance between the two locations, a travel time of the transport from its location to the customer and/or goods location, and a travel time of the transport with the picked-up customer and/or goods from the first location to the first hub or from the first hub to another first customer destination.

15 A system manager sends a communication to a transport at a location to pick up the first customer and/or the goods to be coupled to the first customer. The system manager further sends a communication to the transport of a travel route from pick up location of the first customer and/or goods to a customer and/or goods drop-off location.

20 The system manager directs the plurality of transports in the first service zone to unequally distributed locations with exclusive coverage areas of the transports which are disposed in a non-overlapping arrangement within the first service zone.

25 The method can further unequally distribute all of the transports in the first service zone based on one of population density, historic request density and traffic conditions, creating an exclusive coverage service area about each transport in the first service zone, where the coverage service areas are disposed in a dynamic arrangement with adjacent exclusive transport service sub-areas, and directing the plurality of transports in the first service zone to unevenly distributed locations with non-overlapping coverage areas.

30 According to the method, after one transport begins to travel to pick up the first customer at the first location or the goods at the goods location, the one transport is removed from roaming in the first service zone. The method relocates the position of at least one other transport in the service zone so that the coverage areas of all of the transports are disposed in a dynamic arrangement to insure a predetermined transit time is met for all areas in the service zone.

35 In the method, after the one transport begins to or is selected to travel to pick up the first customer and the first transport is removed from roaming in the first service zone, the size and/or location of the coverage areas of at least one of the transports in the service zone is varied to meet the predetermined transit time at all locations within the first service zone.

40 The method further includes choosing the one transport of the plurality of transports to answer a service request where the location of the transport relative to a customer issuing a service request satisfies one of a minimum wait time of customer pick-up and a less than maximum transit time of the customer to the customer destination.

45 The method further includes reinserting a new transport into the first service zone and redistributing all of the coverage areas of the plurality of transports in the first service zone to insure distribution of the coverage areas in the first service zone without overlap.

50 The roaming transportation distribution apparatus includes a system manager choosing the one transport of the plurality of transports to answer a service request where the location of the transport relative to a customer or the goods associated with a service request satisfies one of a minimum wait time for customer pick-up and less than a maximum transit time of the customer to the customer destination.

The system manager wirelessly communicates travel information to each of the transports to optimize travel of a transport from a current location of the transport to a customer and/or goods location from a customer and/or goods pick-up and/or location to a customer and/or goods drop-off destination.

The system manager in response to removal of a transport from the plurality of transports in a first service zone when the transport is answering a service request, issues new coordinate information by wireless communication to at least one other transport in the first service zone to redistribute the remaining plurality of transports in the first service zone.

The system manager, executing program instructions, based on current coordinate locations of the plurality of transports remaining in roaming in the first service zone, to vary a size of the coverage area of at least one of the remaining transports to meet transport transit times associated with responses to service requests

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

The various features, advantages, and other uses of the present apparatus and method will become more apparent by referring to the following detailed description and drawing in which:

FIG. 1 is a conceptual diagram illustrating a transportation system providing transportation service to a service zone around a transit node;

FIG. 2 is a diagram showing the delivery of a passenger from a pick-up location in one service area to a destination location in another service area according to the method and apparatus;

FIG. 3 is a diagram illustrating the use of the present method and apparatus over multiple service areas;

FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram illustrating the components of the apparatus for implementing the method;

FIG. 5 is a block diagram showing the construction of the system manager;

FIGS. 6, 7, 8, and 9A-9D are pictorial representations illustrating the operation of the present apparatus and method to implement distribution of the transport transports within a service area;

FIG. 10 is a pictorial representation of the present method and apparatus implemented in multiple overlapping service areas;

FIG. 11 is a flowchart depicting the operation of the apparatus and method for an inbound request;

FIGS. 12A and 12B are flow diagrams depicting the operation of the apparatus and method for an outbound request;

FIG. 13 is a conceptual diagram illustrating a transportation system providing goods transportation service to a service zone around a transit node;

FIG. 14 is a diagram depicting in another aspect of the goods transportation service shown in FIG. 13;

FIG. 15 is a pictorial representation of another aspect of the goods transportation service system shown in FIGS. 13 and 14; and

FIG. 16 is a flow diagram depicting the operation of the apparatus and method relating to the transportation of goods within service zones.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 1 depicts a service zone 100 which surrounds a centrally located node 102, which may be a train or subway

station or a bus stop in an urban transit or transportation system, or any other transportation system having defined locations for transport vehicles to pick-up and drop off passengers. The node 102 also acts as the central hub 102 of the service zone 100, and the terms node and hub are used interchangeably herein. The service zone 100 may also be referred to as a coverage or service area herein.

The service zone 100 is illustrated with multiple sub zones and has service transports distributed through each of the sub zones to minimize travel time between the location of the transport, a pick-up location of a customer requesting a pick-up and the delivery of the customer to the end drop off destination. It is desirable to provide improvement to such an urban transportation system so as to minimize pick up time as well as meeting the maximum travel time to the drop off location.

The service zone 100 may be a single large defined area, with a circular service zone shown by way of example only. It will be understood that the service zone 100 may take other shapes, such as polygonal, triangular, oval, etc., depending upon geographic features surrounding the node 102, population density, service request density and other factors.

Further, the service zone 100 is illustrated with concentric sub-zones 101, 103, 105 and 107, with four sub-zones shown in FIG. 1 spaced at one mile, two mile, three mile, and four mile radii, respectively, from the central hub 102.

Service transports (hereafter "transports") 104, 106 may be distributed throughout the sub-zones of the larger service zone 100 to minimize travel time between the location of the transport 104 and a pick up location 111 of a customer 110 initiating a pick-up service request. The transports 104, 106 may be any type of transport, such as a car, minivan, bus, SUV, etc.

Each transport 104, 106, etc., has global positioning system (GPS) capability. A GPS transceiver can be mounted in each transport 104, 106 for communication with the global positioning satellite network to provide a central system manager with the current GPS coordinates of each transport 104, 106.

Each transport 104 and 106 also has wireless communication capability with the system manager. The wireless communication capability can include a cellular network transmitter and receiver mounted in the vehicle for communication between the transport 104, 106 and the system manager via a cellular telephone network. Such cellular wireless communication can also be implemented by using the driver's cellular telephone for direct communication via the cellular network with the system manager or through the cellular telephone system of the transport 104, 106.

Other forms of wireless communication, including satellite communication, etc., can also be employed to transfer data between each transport 104, 106 and the central manager.

The overall size of the service zone 100 is selected so that predetermined transit time, such as 15 minutes for example, can be met for all customer pick-up requests at any location within the service zone 100 to the drop off destination.

Thus, it is possible that, depending upon population density and service request density, as well as geographic features, one service zone 100 of a plurality of service zones shown in FIG. 3, can have larger or smaller overall dimensions than that of surrounding service zones.

FIG. 1 shows a travel route 108 taken by a transport 104 picking up a first customer 110 at a first location 111 and delivering the first customer 110 to the hub 102. It is possible that the transport 104 can pick up a second customer 112 at

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a second location **114** when transporting the first customer **110** to the node **102** as long as the predetermined transit time period can still be met.

The same predetermined transit time requirement can also apply to transporting a customer **120** from the hub **102** to a second location **122** within the service zone **100**.

FIG. 2 depicts two service zones **100,130**, one surrounding the hub **102**, which will be described, for example, as utilizing transports **104** to pick-up a customer **109** and transport the customer **109** to the hub **102**. From the hub **102**, the customer **109** travels along the urban transit system **134** to a hub **132** in a second service zone **130**. At the second in hub **132** of the second service zone **130**, a separate set of transports **136** transport the customer to drop off location **138** within the second service zone **130**.

FIG. 3 depicts multiple service zones, each with a small amount of overlap with adjacent service areas arranged in a city or city area along urban transit lines.

For operation of the roaming transport distribution management system, each customer or potential customer **400**, as shown in FIG. 4, would utilize a communication device **402**. The communication device **402** may be any communication device, such as a cellular telephone, smartphone, laptop computer, tablet computer, desk-top computer etc., as long as the communication device **402** is capable of generating a pick-up request via wireless communication network **404**, such as cellular network, to a system manager **406**, also referred to as a server **406**, as well as sending GPS location signals generated by use of a device capable of communication with GPS satellite **408** to identify the pick-up location of the customer **400**.

Each transport **410** within the service zone **100** will also carry a communication device **412**, such as a computer, a portable computer, a cellular telephone, tablet computer, etc., with wireless network communication and GPS communication capabilities.

The server **406**, as described hereafter, may be a physical computing device with at least one processor, memory, database and wireless and GPS communication capabilities, which communicates with the customers **400** and the transports **410** via the wireless communication network **404** using GPS location data generated by the communication devices **402** and **412** carried by each customer **400** and transport **410**.

In general, one customer **400** will generate a pick-up request by using an application on his communication device **402** to transmit his GPS location and the pick-up request through the wireless communication network **404** to the server **406**. The pick-up request may identify the customer's name and include other customer information as well as special instructions, including time deadlines, number of passengers, luggage, etc.

In response to a pick-up request from a customer **400**, the server **406**, as described hereafter, will dynamically select one service transport **410** within the service zone **100** which is capable of traveling from the current location of the transport **410** to the location of the customer **400**, pick up the customer, and then transport the customer along the fastest route to the hub within the predetermined maximum transit time period. This direction of customer **400** travel from a pick-up destination to the node is referred to as an inbound transport.

For inbound requests, shown in FIG. 11, the server **406** sorts the transports in the service zone to determine which transport is closest to the customer making the request in step **900**. If the closest transport to the customer making the request is already at full occupant capacity, in step **902**, then

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the server **406** advances to check the next closest transport in the service zone to the customer making the request.

Alternately, if the selected transport in step **900** is determined in step **902** to not be at full occupant capacity, the server **406** queries if the transport is roaming in step **904**. Roaming is the availability of a transport, either stationarily parked or moving within its defined coverage area, described hereafter, and available for customer transport. A transport is removed from roaming when a transport is directed to pick up a customer or is inbound or outbound with customer(s) to and from the hub in the service zone.

If the transport is not roaming, the server **406** advances to step **906** to query if the selected transport **410** is inbound to the hub. If the selected transport is not inbound to the hub as determined in step **906**, the server **406** advances to the next closest transport.

Referring back to step **904**, if the server **406** determines that the selected transport is roaming, the server **406** determines if the wait time between the time that the customer made the request and the time that the selected transport **410** will arrive at the location of the customer is above a maximum wait time. If yes, the server **406** advances to select another transport. However, if the determined wait time is below the maximum wait time in step **908**, the server **406** assigns the selected transport to the customer request in step **910**.

Referring again to step **906**, if the server **406** determines that the transport is inbound to the hub, the server in step **912** queries where the selected transport will have to move in a direction away from the hub in order to pick up another customer making the current request. If the answer is yes from step **906**, the server **406** advances to select another transport.

However, if the determination in step **912** is negative, the server **406** in step **914** queries if the selected transport is heading in a direction toward the same hub as the hub in the current customer request. If not, the server **406** selects another transport to honor the customer request. However, if the determination in step **914** is yes, the server determines in step **916** if the trip time for the selected transport of the first customer picked up by the transport will exceed the predetermined transit time, such as 15 minutes, for example, in step **916** if the transport picks up the second customer making the current request. If the transit time for the first customer is less than the predetermined transit time, such as 15 minutes, from step **916**, the server assigns the selected transport to honor the customer request in step **918**. However, if the outcome of the query in step **916** is yes, that is, the maximum transit time would be exceeded, the server **406** advances to select another transport to honor the current customer request.

Outbound transportation via transport from the hub is also possible after the customer arrives at the hub. For example, the customer communicates via the wireless network through his communication device **402** or other means of communication to the server **406** informing the server **406** of his expected arrival time at one particular hub, along with other customer identification, preferences, etc. The server **406** then communicates with the driver of a transport **410** to insure that a transport **410** is at the hub at the time the customer **400** arrives at the hub. The transport **410** then picks up the customer **400** and transports the customer **400** to his or her drop off designation within the service zone **100**. This will be referred to hereafter as an outbound transport.

As shown in FIGS. 12A and 12B, upon receiving an outbound request from a customer, the server **406** sorts the transports in the service zone to determine which transport

is closest to the hub in step 940. If the first selected transport is determined to be roaming in step 942, the server 406 assigns the selected transport to honor the customer outbound request in step 944.

However, if the selected transport is not roaming at step 942, the server 406 queries if the transport is inbound to the hub with customers in step 946. If answer is yes from step 946, the server 406 in step 948 queries if the outbound capacity of the selected transport has been reached. If the answer to the query in step 948 is yes, the server 406 advances to select another transport to honor the outbound customer request.

However, if the outcome of the query in step 948 is negative, the server 406 determines if the outbound trip time of the selected transport is above the maximum wait time for the outbound customer request in step 950. If the determination is yes, the server 406 advances to select another transport. However, if the inbound trip time is below the maximum wait time to honor the outbound customer request, the server 406 in step 952 determines if the outbound trip time to the customer's destination is greater than the maximum transit time in step 952. If the determination is yes, the server 406 advances to select a different transport. However, if the outcome of the query in step 952 is negative, the server 406 queries in step 954 if the time between drop offs at the hub and the destination of the outbound customer request is too large. If the determination is yes, the server 406 advances to select a different transport. However, if the time between drop offs is not too large or is below a preset maximum time, the server 406 will assign a selected transport to honor the outbound customer request in step 956.

Referring back to step 946 in FIG. 12A, if the server 406 determines that the transport is not inbound with customers, the server 406 next checks if the inbound transport is without customers or is waiting at the hub in step 958. If this determination is negative, the server 406 checks for another transport.

However, if the outcome in step 958 is yes, the server 406 determines if the outbound capacity of the selected transport has been reached in step 960. If yes, the server 406 searches for another transport. If not, the server 406 determines in step 962 if the outbound trip time for all passengers in the transport is greater than the maximum predetermined transit time in step 962. If the outcome is yes, the server 406 searches for another transport.

However, if the determination in step 962 is negative, the server 406 in step 964 determines if the time between drop-off locations of the multiple customers going to different destinations in the same transport is greater than a maximum allowed time. If yes, the server 406 searches for a different transport. However, if not, the server 406 assigns the transport in step 966 to the new request.

The server 406 communicates via the wireless communication network 404 with the communication device 412 in the transport 410 and provides the driver of the transport 410 with the customer location, customer information, and other pertinent data. The server 406 also transmits information pertaining to the most expeditious route from location of the transport 410 to the first location of the customer 400 and then from the first location to the hub.

Further, the server 406 dynamically repositions the transport 410 within the service zone to optimum positions, even when the transport 410 is not transporting a customer or traveling toward a customer pick-up location. This enables the transports 410 within a service zone 100 to be optimally distributed in a manner responsive to population density and

service request density in order to enable the predetermined maximum transit period to be met for all customers within a service zone.

The server 406 can dynamically change the location of one or more of the transports 410 within the service zone 100 at different times of the day to meet varying service request densities, such as morning rush hour, evening rush hour, afternoon or evening sporting events, etc.

The roaming transport distribution management system, as shown in FIG. 5, includes a system manager which may be incorporated into the server 406 shown in FIG. 4. The system manager 406 includes a controller, such as a processor based computing device coupled to a database 504.

It will be understood that the following description of the main functional blocks of the system manager or server 406 may be virtual elements, rather than physical computing devices.

The controller 502 is responsible for creating, deleting, and managing all of the different components of the system manager. The controller 502 creates hub monitors 506, which monitor one or more hub managers 510 within a particular area. For example, a single hub monitor 506 can monitor five hub managers 510. Each hub manager 510 is associated with a hub, such as hub 102, and may also be referred to as a hub 510.

The hub monitors 506 gather information necessary for the operation of the controller 502. The hub monitors 506 carry out their own thread gathering asynchronously. The hub monitors 506 primarily keep track of the location of each hub 510 and the area of coverage of the assigned hub 510.

A hub locator 508 accesses each of the hub monitors 506 to obtain information about the hubs 510. When a customer request 512 is received by the system manager 406, the controller 502 passes the request to the hub locator 508 which creates a thread and processes the hub information to determine which hub 510 should receive the request.

The hub locator 508 is coupled to a hub dispatcher 514, which is responsible for sending the request to a hub, or the hub locator 508 has located hub manager 510 after it. A notification manager 516 is provided as part of the system manager 407 to enable communication between the various components of the system manager 407. The notification manager 516 also enables threads associated with each customer request and customer transport to the hub to notify other threads when they have completed their tasks. Each thread registers itself with the notification manager 516.

Each of the components of the system manager 407 registers itself with the notification manager 516. The hubs 510 also register themselves with the controller 502, which in turn passes on the hub information to the hub monitors 506. If a hub monitor 506 is at full capacity with the predetermined number of hubs, the controller 502 will create a new hub monitor 506. When the system manager 407 receives a request 512, a hub locator 508 thread is created. The hub locator 508 looks at all of the hubs 510 controlled by hub monitors 506 to locate the closest hub 510 within a certain predetermined distance range from the customer location issuing the request 512.

The hub managers controlling each hub 510 include a roaming distribution transport algorithm for distributing transports within a service zone surrounding a hub 510 to enable each customer request 512 to be accepted and the customer delivered to the hub 510 within the predetermined maximum time period or window, such as 15 minutes for example. Even though the illustrated service zone covers concentric circles up to a four-mile radius, it will be under-

stood that the service zone, depending upon geographic factors, population density and request density, may have a larger or smaller service area, such as from one mile up to greater than four miles.

Since maintaining all of the transports at the hub 510 would require the transports to travel a first distance out to the location of a customer making a request for transport and then retrace the same distance back to the hub, the transports would easily exceed the predetermined transit time period. As such, the transports need to be distributed throughout the service zone.

Prior transit applications provide an even distribution of the transports across the entire service zone. However, this does not take into account variations in population density, request density, geographic factor, etc.

The roaming distribution transport algorithm executed by each hub manager 510 automatically insures that the transports are distributed in a certain manner across the entire service zone so that a customer request originating from any location within the service zone can be honored within the predetermined transit time period met.

FIGS. 6-9 depict the service zone 100. Although the service zone 100 is illustrated as having a circular shape, it may have other shapes, such as rectangular, square, polygonal or an irregular peripheral boundary depending upon population density, transit request density, geographic factors, etc. The service zone 100 can have any maximum radius. The four-mile radius shown in FIGS. 1-3 may be applied to the service zone 100. Alternately, the service zone 100 can represent the one-mile sub-zone of the service zone 100 shown in FIGS. 1-3. The service zone could also apply to the entire area covered by the two-mile radius, the three-mile radius, or the four-mile radius.

As shown in FIG. 6, each transport is represented by a geometric exclusive coverage area 600, with the circular shaped coverage area shown by way of example only. Each transport is located at approximately the center of its coverage area 600 and can be stationary, or moving within a small area generally centered within the coverage area 600.

The distribution algorithm eliminates overlaps between the coverage areas 600 of all of the transports within the service zone 100.

In one configuration, all of the transports have the same size exclusive coverage areas 600 as shown in FIG. 6. The distribution algorithm, while preventing overlap between any of the edges of coverage areas 600 of the transports, is capable of moving each coverage areas 600 including coverage areas 600A-600F both radially inward and outward, or circumferentially, or in any direction (straight, arcuate, zig-zag, etc.), as shown by the arrows in FIG. 6, to achieve a transport distribution which places one transport within range of any customer issuing a request within the service zone 100 to meet the predetermined maximum transit time for moving a particular transport from the present location of the transport to the location of the customer issuing the request, picking up the customer, and then transporting the customer to the hub 602.

In FIG. 7, the transport in coverage area 600A has moved to pick up a customer and can be transiting toward the hub 602. As soon as the transport is assigned a customer request and begins moving toward the location of a customer, the hub manager 510 removes the transport in coverage area 600A from roaming, as shown by the gap in FIG. 7 where coverage area 600A of the assigned transport has been removed. However, its coverage area 600A continues to impact the coverage areas of the remaining roaming transports.

The roaming distribution transport algorithm then rebalances the location of at least one or more of the remaining transports and their associated coverage areas 600 by slightly moving one or more of the coverage area 600 in circumferential, straight, curved, or radial directions to the distribution shown by example in FIG. 8. The hub manager 510 for the service zone 100 moves, for example, coverage area 600 E radially inward to fill the gap left by the removal of the transport in coverage area 600A. The arrows in the adjacent coverage areas show some of the directions that the hub manager 510 can move each of the coverage areas.

Any of the adjacent coverage areas 600B, 600C, 600E and 600F and their associated transports, can also be moved to a new rebalanced distribution.

As shown by example in FIG. 9A, three gaps exist in the service zone coverage areas due to three transports from each of coverage areas 600H, 600I, and 600J being assigned to customer pick up. It should be noted that these gaps are a momentary occurrence and would normally be filled with coverage areas of adjacent located transports, such as coverage areas 600L, 600M, and 600N in the manner described above.

FIG. 9B depicts the operation of the hub manager 510 or server 406 in reinserting a transport back into service zone 100 after the transport has dropped off a customer at the hub 602. In this example, the hub manager 510 reinserts a transport shown by its coverage area 600K in the innermost ring of coverage areas surrounding the hub 602. The hub manager 510 rebalances the location of selected ones or all of the coverage areas 600A-600M in the service area 100, as shown in FIG. 9B, to accommodate the reinserted transport and its coverage area 600K.

The hub manager 510 operates in a similar manner when a transport has dropped off a customer at the customer destination at any location within the service zone 100, after transit from the hub 602 or from another location within the service zone 100. The hub manager 510 can reinsert the transport, once the customer has been dropped off, at its then current location or direct a transport to a different location to fill a gap in the coverage areas within service zone 100.

This minimizes to a certain extent some of the larger gaps at the perimeter of the service zone 100, but large gap areas or open spaces at the perimeter of the service zone 100 still exist; but should be able to be covered by the closet transport to meet the maximum predetermined transit time.

Referring back to FIG. 9A, three gaps denoted by the removal of transport coverage areas 600H, 600I, and 600J are shown in service area 100. The hub manager 510 and the server 406 can fill these gaps by also enlarging coverage areas associated with selected transports in addition to redistributing the coverage areas within the service zone 100. The enlarged coverage areas 600L, 600M, and 600N still enable customer request within the service zone 100 to be met within the predetermined pickup and/or transit time.

The distribution algorithm also is capable of taking into account population density variations within the service zone 100, historic request density variations within the service zone 100, as well as the current distribution of transports within the service zone 100. The distribution algorithm, as shown in FIG. 9D, is capable of initially providing or varying the size, in the case of the coverage areas 600 and/or the radius or diameter of each coverage area 600, based on the population or historic request density variations within the service zone 100.

FIG. 9D shows multiple different diameter sizes of the coverage areas 600, with the size corresponding to the area of coverage for a particular transport located within each

coverage area **600**. Larger diameter circles, for example, indicate a larger coverage area for a particular transport. The smallest diameter circles indicate a small exclusive coverage area for a particular transport.

As shown in the upper right quadrant of the service zone **100** in FIG. **9**, there is a larger density **603** of small diameter coverage areas **600**. This indicates the high population density or a high historic request density within this area of the service zone **100**. Conversely, in the left quadrant area **605** of the service zone **100**, predominately larger sized coverage areas **600** are shown. This indicates a larger exclusive coverage area for each transport and a corresponding smaller number of transports in this area of service zone **100**.

Since higher request density sub-zones of the service zone will have more customers and therefore more transports removed from the number of available transports, additional transports are provided in such areas with smaller coverage areas to accommodate all customers and still meet the predetermined transit time period.

With the variable size indicator capability within the distribution algorithm, when a particular transport is removed from roaming distribution since it is transporting a customer to the hub **602**, can redistribute and rebalance the remaining available transports by either resizing the diameter of the coverage area of one or more transports or by adjusting the position of one or more of the transport coverage areas, or both changing the size of certain coverage areas and rebalancing the position of some or all of the transports and their coverage areas.

In any of the rebalancing or resizing computations performed by the distribution algorithm, the hub manager **510** will issue position commands to the effected transports via the communication network which direct the transports to change the center of their location, either the position at which they are parked or the center of the position about which they are roaming to a new position. The algorithm can incorporate a distance tolerance so that the transports are not commanded to move only short distances, but commands will be issued only when a more significant difference, such as 400 meters for example, is necessary.

The hub manager **510** receives GPS signals from the transports indicating the current position of the transports and is therefore capable of both monitoring the location of all of the transports within the respective service zone as well as issuing commands for one or more of the transports to move to different geographic locations.

FIG. **10** depicts a modification to the coverage area **100** described above. In FIG. **10**, the same central service area **100** around central node **102** still exists. However, additional coverage areas, with three coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804** being shown by example are each formed about separate nodes or hubs such as stations on mass transport lines. It will be understood that separate coverage areas, similar to coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804**, may be provided around each node or station in the transport area or only about certain hubs or stations. Coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804** may be the same size as the coverage area **100** or may be smaller or larger in coverage areas. Further, the coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804** can be separate from or, overlap each other and, in conjunction with the central coverage area **100** can form a single enlarged coverage area. Transports, as distributed and described above, in the central coverage area **100** may also serve the additional coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804**. The distribution of the transports may be treated as a single large transport coverage area, including coverage areas **100**, **800**, **802** and **804**, with transport roaming within the

enlarged coverage area formed by the coverage areas **100**, **800**, **802** and **804** and changing which hub each transport goes to depending upon what is most efficient in terms of customer requests, transport location, customer destinations, customer pick up locations, time of day, etc.

The transports may be assigned and roam in the coverage area **100**, including any of the overlapped areas of the coverage area **100** and the coverage areas **800**, **802**, and **804**, where the transports may be dedicated to a specific coverage area **800**, **802** and **804** for a primary pick-up and delivery of customers from a pick-up point to an end destination, such as any of the coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804**, or from the hubs in the coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804** to an end destination within or without of coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804** to an end destination within or without the coverage areas **800**, **802** and **804**.

The above described roaming transport distribution management system can also be used to move goods of practically any form throughout the coverage area, such as coverage area **100** shown in FIG. **13** formed around the central node **102** or the coverage area formed by overlapped coverage areas **100**, **800**, **802** and **804**, in FIG. **10**. Transports **104** can be distributed and managed throughout the coverage area **100** in the same manner as described above.

In FIG. **13**, the transports **104** and the entire transport distribution management system is designed to move goods received from a number of different sources or distribution systems and/or locations to particular destinations within the coverage area **100**.

The term "goods" as used herein means any type of product, article, document, food and the like which can easily be transported in the transport and is of a size, shape and weight that a customer could easily transport the goods home after the transport delivers the customer to the customer end destination. The "goods" can be non-perishable or perishable goods. In the case of perishable goods, the storage container used by the transport to pick up the goods from the storage location and transport the goods to the hub for coupling with the customer, or delivering the goods directly to an end destination within the central area **100**, can be refrigerated by suitable means, such as refrigeration equipment, insulated boxes suitable for carrying ice, ice packs, etc.

Such goods can also come from a variety of sources including the retailers, goods manufacturers, suppliers, distributors, or delivery entities, such as UPS, Federal Express, etc., for the transport of goods over short or long distances.

Sources **812**, **814** and **816** in FIG. **13** can be located within the coverage area **100** in the case of goods source **816** or outside of the coverage area **100** in the case of the goods sources **812** and **814**. The goods from any of the sources **812**, **814** and **816** can be delivered to the coverage area **100** and/or any location in the coverage area **100** by a variety of means, including, for example, UPS and Federal Express, retailer, manufacturer or distributor delivery vehicles, Post Office, food and restaurant delivery services, etc. In the case of the goods source **812**, the goods source **812** can deliver the goods to a location in the coverage area **100** which is treated as an inbound transport request to the management system. The management system assigns a transport **104** to pick up the goods from the source **812** at the edge of the coverage area **100** or any other location, even outside of the coverage area **100** at a defined location or at the goods source **812** itself, and then deliver the goods to a goods connection or storage area as described hereafter.

Alternately, upon receiving a request for goods delivery, such as from the goods source **816**, which is shown by

example as being located within the coverage area **100**, the management system or hub manager assigns the transport **104** which travels to the location of the goods source **816** or other pick-up location and picks up the assigned goods for transport to the storage location or customer location.

Goods source **814**, for example, may have its own delivery network **820** so that goods from the goods source **814** are delivered by the goods source **814** delivery network **820** directly to the storage location **830**.

The goods delivery feature can employ one or more assigned collection or storage locations where the goods can be delivered by one of the transports **104** to a storage location where the goods can be placed in a storage container, described hereafter, assigned to a particular customer.

In an aspect where the goods transport function is coupled to a passenger transport function, as described above and shown in FIGS. 1-12B, a customer could order goods from any of the goods sources **812**, **814** and **816** and specify that the goods be delivered to a particular location, such as the node **102**, at a particular time. The pickup time can be the time the customer is likely to arrive at the central node **102** by use of one of the transports **104** or by the mass transit system.

The customer pick-up time may be the only critical time when goods are to be coupled to the customer at the customer pick-up location. The hub manager **406** will select a transport that is in a location where the transport can pick up the goods from the storage location **830** or the goods source **812**, **814**, and **816** etc., and still meet the customer arrival time at the central hub **102**. The transport may be directed to pick up the goods at an earlier time, such as when the particular transport is in proximity to the storage location **830** containing the goods.

The hub manager can direct a transport to pick up goods at the central hub **102**, a home or current location of a customer and deliver the goods to the storage location **830** or the central node **102**. The transport **104** can also be directed by the hub manager to pick up the goods at the central node **102** and deliver the goods to the storage location or to an end destination, such as a customer's home, office or other location requested by a customer.

When the hub manager selects a transport to pick up goods, the hub manager removes the transport from the distribution of transports in the service zone **100** and redistributes the remaining transports in the service zone **100** as described above.

For example, the storage location **830**, in this aspect, is the logistics node where the transports **104** can be temporarily located in an off duty mode for refueling or recharging, driver reassignment, driver rests, meal breaks, etc.

The storage location **830** may also be located at one or more other locations within the area **100**, such as that the hub **102**, or at any other location.

If the storage location of the goods is located at the hub **102**, options available for the goods to be delivered to the storage location at the hub **102** as soon as the goods are picked up from a goods source or other goods transfer location, ahead of the customer arrival time at the hub **102**. This would enable, for example, the customer, when arriving at the hub **102**, to enter the storage location, retrieve his goods and then proceed on his own to his end destination or to utilize a transport to take him along with his coupled goods to his end destination in the manner described above.

The storage location **830** may have an assignable storage area **832**, shown in FIG. 14, typically under secure conditions, with a number of storage containers or storage compartments **834** where goods from any of the goods sources

812, **814** and **816** can be delivered by a transport **104** or other goods delivery transport and temporarily stored for eventual transport or pick up by the particular customer. Appropriate assignment of a storage compartment **834** coupled to a customer name or I.D., delivery time, or other information will be input to and handled by the management system.

It will also be understood that since the goods may come from sources far outside of the coverage area **100**, such that delivery from the goods source to the coverage area **100** may take more than one day, the management system, upon receipt of goods for a particular customer can send a notification to the customer and arrange for coupling of a customer or passenger with the goods at a predetermined location and at a pick up time.

In the case of the three goods sources **812**, **814** and **816**, the goods delivered to or picked up from any of the sources **812**, **814** and **816** are transported by a transport **104** to the storage location **830** where the goods are placed in a storage compartment **834** at the storage location **830** and assigned to a particular customer I.D. When a customer expresses a desire to pick up the goods which will be or have already been delivered to the storage location **830**, the management system, i.e., the hub manager, assigns a transport **104**, which may be capable of carrying a storage compartment **834**, as shown FIG. 15, from the location **830** to the node **102** at the time the customer has indicated he will arrive at the node **102**. The transport **104** with the goods for that customer will arrive at the node **102**, pick up the customer to couple the goods with the customer, and then deliver both the customer and the goods to the customer end destination within the coverage area **100**.

The storage containers **834** in the storage area **832** can take any form, such as reusable storage containers which are moved from the storage area **832** to the transport **104** and then taken to the end destination by the customer where the storage containers **834** can be reused, returned, etc.

The storage containers **834** may also remain solely at the storage area **832** and the goods, temporarily stored in one storage container **834** for a particular customer removed and placed in the transport **104** assigned to the customer. This could, for example, be the case where the goods are shipped by the goods source **812**, **814** or **816** in their own packaging.

The storage containers **834** may also be in the form of cardboard or plastic boxes which are reusable, exchangeable, disposable, etc.

Since goods come in all shapes, sizes and weights, the storage containers **834** may be of the size to encompass all goods which can be transported in a single transport **104** for one or more customers carried by the transport carried to their end destinations or provided in different sizes to enable a storage container to be selected with the size to measure it with the size of the goods.

It will also be understood that the transport distribution management system may be employed to exclusively move goods from any or all of the goods sources **812**, **814** and **816** to any particular location or end destination within the coverage area **100** with or without a customer. In this aspect, the transport distribution management system acts more as the carrier or delivery service, but a carrier or delivery service confined to a particular coverage area. The roaming distribution of transports **104** within the coverage area **100** assures a short amount of time between a customer request for pickup of the goods and the delivery of the goods to an end destination.

It will also be understood that delivery of goods for a particular customer or an end destination within the cover-

age area from a goods source, where the goods are delivered directly by the goods source, rather than being picked up by a transport, can be such that the goods are delivered by the goods source or other delivery means to the storage location **830**.

As described above, after delivering a customer and/or goods to an end destination within the coverage area **100**, the transport is reassigned by system manager **406** for the hub manager **510** for roaming within the coverage area **100** for a subsequent assignment.

Referring now to FIG. **16**, there is depicted an example of a sequence of operation for distributing and assigning transports within the coverage area, herein defined by example solely as coverage area **100**, for pickup and delivery of customers and/or goods from pick up locations to the central node and from the central node **102** to an end destination of the customer and/or goods.

The control functions may be executed in one or more processors executing program instructions in the system manager **406** or any of the hub managers **510** when the system manager **406** receives a delivery notice in step **900** that, for the example of goods only, indicates that goods assigned to a particular customer are to be received by the system. The delivery notice can contain any suitable identification information, including a goods I.D., customer I.D., pick up location, delivery location, desired time of pick up and assigned time of delivery, etc.

The system manager **406** then determines in step **902** how the goods will be obtained by the system. In step **904**, the goods can be delivered directly from the goods source to the system by a goods source delivery means. In this case, the goods are typically delivered by the goods source directly to the storage location in step **906**.

If the delivery notice requires the system manager **406** to pick up the goods, the system assigns a transport in step **910** and provides information directing the assigned transport to a predetermined delivery location in step **912**.

Once the assigned transport picks up the goods, the system manager **406** directs the transport to deliver the goods to a particular destination, such as to the storage location **830** in step **914**, directly to the central node in step **916**, or, in the case of goods only, in step **918**, to a goods destination within the coverage area in step **920**.

Assuming that the goods are the storage location **830** in step **906**, when it is time to deliver the goods to the end destination or to couple the goods with the customer who is arriving at the central node at a predetermined time, the system again assigns a transport in step **924** to acquire the goods from the storage location **830** and then transport the goods to the central node for coupling with the customer at the pre-set time in step **926**. When the customer arrives at the central node, the customer is directed to the pre-assigned transport **104** thereby coupling the customer assigned goods with the particular customer in step **928**. The assigned transport **104** then delivers the customer and the goods to the end destination, typically the end destination of the customer in step **930**.

The system may have the capability of providing repeatable schedules for customers so that a customer is picked up on a daily or other scheduled basis at a pick up location and transported inbound to the node. Alternately, or in addition to the inbound mode of scheduled transportation, the repeatable schedule may be the time that the customer arrives on a daily or other scheduled basis at one particular node. It will be understood within the concept of repeatable scheduling;

it is still possible for a customer to alter the standard schedule for a single day or for an extended period of time, etc.

Since the system now contains the pick-up times of a particular customer at a pick-up location or at the central node, the system can more easily coordinate the delivery of goods to the node when the customer arrives at the node, such as having the goods already in the transport used to pick up the customer from a pick-up location and deliver the customer via an inbound transit to the node.

The system can have an open platform structure with respect to customer schedules, and pick-up events requested by a customer; either at a customer pick-up location for transport inbounds to the node or at the node for transport in an outbound mode to an end destination set by the customer.

This information allows third parties, who are delivering goods to customers covered by the system, to more easily coordinate the delivery of goods to the customer location, either by insuring that the goods are delivered to the storage location **830** sufficiently ahead of the time of a customer pick-up so that the goods may be carried by the transport when the transport picks up the customer, either at a pick-up location or at the central node. This open platform also enables multiple third parties, all of whom may be supplying goods to a single particular customer, to access the system schedule and determine when the particular customer is arriving at a central node. This enables the third parties to easily coordinate the delivery of goods to a particular customer in a timely manner for coupling with the customer when the customer is picked up a customer established pick up location or to the storage location **830** for subsequent delivery by a transport to the central node at the time that the customer is expected to arrive at the node.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of operating a roaming transport distribution system to service customer requests for transportation, the method comprising:

operating a fleet of transports in a first service zone having a first hub for transporting at least one of customers or goods within the first service zone to and from the first hub, the fleet of transports having global positioning system coordinate capability and wireless communication capability;

receiving a service request for delivery of goods located at a first location in the first service zone to a destination;

locating a first transport of a plurality of transports in the first service zone to answer the service request based on one or more of the first location of a first customer, a second location of the first transport, a distance between the first and second locations, and a travel time of the first transport from the second location to the first location;

sending, using the wireless communication capability, a communication to the first transport to travel to the first location to pick up the goods for transport to the destination;

creating an exclusive coverage area about each transport in the first service zone, the coverage areas disposed in a dynamic, non-overlapping arrangement with adjacent transport coverage areas such that movement of the first transport to travel to the first location results in a change to at least one of the coverage areas; and

directing, using the global positioning system coordinate capability, the plurality of transports in the first service zone to unevenly distributed coordinates within the coverage areas.

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- 2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
unequally distributing all transports in the first service zone based on at least one of population density, historic request density and traffic conditions.
- 3. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
after the first transport is selected for travel to the first location,
removing the first transport from roaming in the first service zone; and
relocating a position of at least one other transport in the first service zone.
- 4. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
after the first transport is selected to travel to the first location, removing the first transport from automatic roaming in the first service zone; and
varying at least one or a size location of the coverage areas of at least one of the transports in the first service zone to meet a defined transit time at all locations within the first service zone.
- 5. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
choosing a second transport of the plurality of transports to answer a service request where a location of the second transport relative to a customer issuing a service request satisfies one of a minimum wait time for customer pick-up and a maximum transit time of the customer to a customer drop-off destination.
- 6. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
redistributing the coverage areas of the plurality of transports in the first service zone, upon arrival of a new transport into the first service zone, to insure distribution of the coverage areas in the first service zone without overlap.
- 7. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
providing a plurality of additional service zones adjacent to the first service zone;
providing each additional service zone with a plurality of transports; and
controlling a location of each transport in at least two of the first service zone and the additional service zones as a single service zone.
- 8. The method of claim 7, further comprising:
arranging the first service zone and the additional service zones such that at least two of the first service zone and the additional service zones overlap each other.
- 9. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
providing a storage location in the first service zone;
providing a plurality of distinct storage compartments in the storage location, each storage compartment selectively assignable for goods associated with a unique customer.
- 10. The method of claim 9, further comprising:
assigning a transport to transport the goods for a particular assigned customer from the storage location to one of the first hub and a customer end destination to couple the goods with the particular assigned customer.
- 11. The method of claim 9, further comprising:
assigning a transport to transport the goods for a particular assigned customer from the storage location to a customer location before arrival of the particular assigned customer at the customer location.

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- 12. The method of claim 11, further comprising:
providing the customer location as the first hub in the first service zone.
- 13. The method of claim 10, further comprising:
establishing repeatable scheduled pick-up times for a customer at one of a customer established pick-up location and a customer arrival at the first hub.
- 14. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
allowing access to a customer transport schedule to third parties to allow the third parties to coordinate the delivery of goods to the customer at the first hub at a time of customer arrival at the first hub.
- 15. A roaming transport distribution apparatus to service customer requests for transportation, the apparatus comprising:
a plurality of transports in a first service zone having a first hub for transporting at least one of customers or goods within the first service zone to and from the first hub;
each transport having global positioning system coordinate capability and wireless communication capability;
a controller, executing program instructions, for coordinating coordinate positions of each of the plurality of transports in the first service zone and selecting transports for transporting at least one of a customer or a good in response to service requests using the global positioning system coordinate capability and the wireless communication capability; and
the controller, executing program instructions, in response to a location of a coverage area associated with each transport within the first service zone for distributing the coverage areas of each transport in the first service zone in an uneven distribution within the first service zone to insure less than a maximum predetermined transit time for transporting a the customer from a pick-up location to a drop-off destination.
- 16. The apparatus of claim 15, further comprising:
the controller wirelessly communicating direction information to each transport to control travel of a transport from a current location of the transport to at least one of a customer location, a goods location, or from a customer pick-up location and a goods location to a customer end destination.
- 17. The apparatus of claim 15, further comprising:
the controller, in response to removal of a transport from the plurality of transports in the first service zone when the transport is answering a service request, issuing new coordinate information to at least one other transport in the first service zone by wireless communication to balance a distribution of the remaining plurality of transports in the first service zone.
- 18. The apparatus of claim 15, further comprising:
the controller executing program instructions, based on current coordinate locations of the plurality of transports remaining in roaming in the first service zone, to vary a size of the coverage area of at least one of the remaining transports to meet transport transit times associated with responses to customer requests.

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